

Gildea gets last chance to beat PSU

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By Timothy Schoen

UNIVERSITY PARK - Hollidaysburg football coach John Barton was beginning to question himself in the fall of 2008 about his confidence that his star safety, Justin Gildea, could play at the Division I level.

Although the coach thought Gildea should be gaining attention from big-time college programs, no one was showing much interest in the senior. But after a game against Central Mountain that season, Barton's confidence in Gildea was reinforced by a couple of plays he made.

"After that night, I knew he had the ability if he was just given the opportunity," Barton said.

Gildea eventually was given that opportunity by then-Temple coach Al Golden, who offered the Mirror's 2008 Player of the Year not only a scholarship, but a chance to play early in his career.

Temple was the only major college team to offer Gildea a scholarship. Gildea said schools like Maryland and Pittsburgh did show interest in him, but an offer never came.

"There were a lot of schools that missed on him," Barton said. "It was one of those things where people looked at tape, and for whatever reason he didn't fit the bill of what they were looking for."

Fast forward from five seasons ago, when Barton realized he had a Division I athlete on his team, to this Saturday afternoon at Beaver Stadium. Gildea, now a senior, will run out of the visitors' tunnel for the third and final time in his career with the rest of his Temple teammates.

It will be the third time Temple will travel to Happy Valley in Gildea's career, but this year he is the Owls' starting safety and one of the team's captains.

"I remember my freshman year running out there, and I really didn't play at all," Gildea said. "I think I was on one special team, but I can remember just being in awe and taken aback by everything."

The following season, when the Owls again traveled the State College, Gildea said the awe and mystique of playing against Penn State in its own stadium had worn off and he was prepared for the environment.

Come Saturday afternoon, after what Gildea characterized as an intense and spirited week of practice, it will be all about football. The senior said he will be playing with a "chip on his shoulder" and trying to continue to prove he deserved more attention than he received coming out of high school.

"When you play teams like Penn State, you want to show them how you play and that you are good enough to play at this level," Gildea said. "They didn't really recruit me, so yeah, there is a chip on my shoulder, and I would like to show everybody that I can play."

Gildea has played this way since his freshman year, when he was fighting to earn a spot on the special teams.

In his four years at Temple, the senior has continued to prove he belongs at the Division I level.

"All he has done is go on to be a four-year letterman and a captain," Barton said. "So it's one of those things that it's too bad [not getting more offers], but he has also had a great experience as well."

Saturday is hardly just another game for Gildea and his family. Growing up about an hour from Penn State has put added significance on a matchup that is already an in-state rivalry and a game the Owls have had circled on their calendars.

"I feel like everybody is a Penn State fan from around there," Gildea said of his home region. "Everybody watches the games and has Penn State parties, so you're kind of always around it."

Although Gildea said he wasn't a huge Lions fan growing up, he did occasionally attend games. His dad, Stephen, is a Penn State graduate, and one of his three sisters also attended school there.

Prior to kickoff on Saturday, Gildea's mom, Deanne, is planning to have a large tailgate for friends and family coming to the game.

But Justin will not be the only Gildea performing on the field Saturday. His cousin, Caleb, is a freshman at Penn State and a member of the Blue Band.

Temple coach Steve Addazio earlier this week credited Gildea for his work ethic and the pride that he plays the game with.

"I see in practice a guy that has a great demeanor about him right now, and he is really preparing hard for this football game," the coach said.

Both Addazio and Barton remarked on the toughness Gildea plays the game with. Barton said his football intelligence supplements his athletic abilities very well.

The Temple football program has made significant strides in Gildea's time at the school. The team is continuing to rise and gain respect and is in the first year of competing in the Big East.

Gildea wants to show the state of Pennsylvania that Temple is ready to take the next step and beat the big schools.

"They are the big team from across the state, so everybody gets really excited for this game," Gildea said. "We want to show everyone that Penn State is not the only school in Pennsylvania, and we are the real deal too."